

Parliamentary Procedure

An abridged, basic, preliminary, simplified, bare-bones guide to “Robert's Rules of Order”

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I. WHAT IS THIS "PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE" STUFF, ANYWAY?

Parliamentary procedure, or parliamentary law, is a set of established procedures that enable groups of practically any size to conduct their meetings fairly and efficiently. There are several parliamentary authorities. *Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised (RONR)* is the most widely used. So much so in fact that many people mistakenly think that *Robert's Rules of Order* and “parliamentary procedure” are one in the same thing. However, there are other parliamentary authorities. The second most widely used is the *Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure (Sturgis)* published by the American Institute of Parliamentarians. Others include *Cannon's Concise Guide to Parliamentary Procedure* and *Demeter's Manual of Parliamentary Law and Procedure*. But whatever the title and author, General Henry Robert was first (1876) and all of the others are adaptations of the basic principles he established:

- Communication breaks down when things get too complicated; do just one thing at a time.
- Every member has an equal right to participate in a meeting and an equal obligation to respect the rights of others.
- Every member has a right to full and free discussion of every issue.
- Every member has the right to know the full meaning of each item deliberated and what its effects will be.
- Decisions are made by a majority of the members present, with some exceptions designed to protect the rights of minorities and absentees.
- The rules exist to help you attain your goals; not to interfere with them.

ASI has expressly adopted Robert's Rules of Order (RONR) as its parliamentary authority.

II. THE BASICS

A. Conducting Business

If you want the Board to take some action you must first introduce a “motion” that states exactly what you want to have done. The general rule is that nothing may be deliberated until a motion has first been introduced. This rule is designed to ensure that meetings are well-focused and don't just ramble on aimlessly. In ASI, most substantive motions must be submitted well in advance of the

meeting; there is an exception process for matters that arise after the agenda deadline that cannot wait until the next meeting.

B. Recognition

When a member wishes to speak to a matter she must first gain the attention of the presiding officer -- usually by raising a hand or going to a microphone and then waiting until she is "recognized" to speak. It is the responsibility of the presiding officer to keep track of which members wish to speak and to recognize them in turn. It is the responsibility of everyone else to wait quietly for their turn, with a few exceptions discussed later below. ASI meetings follow a prepared agenda; as each new item comes up the presiding officer will ordinarily first recognize the person who either submitted the matter for the agenda or is otherwise responsible for presenting the item to the group. (E.g., the chair of a committee.)

C. Making a motion

RONR categorizes more than 60 different types of motions. The basic motion, the one that raises a substantive issue for the Board to consider is known as a "main motion."

1. Examples: "I move that we donate \$1,000 to the _____;" "I move to adopt the legislation;" "I move that the President be directed to investigate the situation and report back to the Board at its next meeting." The most important thing is that each motion must be stated clearly and precisely so that everyone understands it.
2. After someone has introduced a motion, another member must "second the motion." The correct form is: "I second the motion", although usually someone will just shout out "second" since you don't have to be recognized by the chair to second a motion. The only reason that a motion needs to be seconded is to ensure that more than one person thinks the matter is worthy of consideration. (You don't want to waste time if this is nothing but the folly of one member and no one else wants to even talk about it.) Seconding a motion does not necessarily mean that you agree with it. It only means that you think the subject is worth talking about. It is not unusual to second a motion and then speak and vote against it. Exception: Items that are placed on the agenda by a committee do not need to be seconded.
3. The presiding officer restates the motion. This ensures that everyone in the room understands clearly what the proposal is (and gives the maker of the motion an opportunity to clarify if the chair gets it wrong.) Once the chair has restated the, it is open for full discussion (debate) and ultimately will be voted upon by the group. Some special motions cannot be debated; you just proceed directly to a vote – more about that later.

D. Debating the Motion

Once the chair opens the motion up to debate, any member who wants to discuss the motion may do so in turn. During this process members may also make 'secondary' motions that relate to the main motion. For example, someone may want to postpone the matter until some later time. Another may want to make changes (amend the motion). Someone may want to refer it to a committee for further study. Someone else may be so frustrated by what's going on they want to just adjourn the meeting now. These secondary motions each have rules of their own, discussed below. The chair will direct the debate by recognizing each person who wants to speak in turn. During debate, you may speak in favor of a motion; you may speak against a motion; you may ask questions about the motion;

or you can move one of the secondary motions we'll be getting to shortly. ASI permits audience members to participate in the debate as well, although the presiding officer may give preference to members of the Board. Once debate has been concluded, the chair will proceed to the vote.

E. Voting

Most motions are adopted by a majority vote, i.e. more than half of those present and voting. A few motions require a higher threshold such as a 2/3 vote or a majority of all members of the Board (not just of those present and voting.) There are several way of taking the vote. The most common is a voice vote. Votes may also be taken by a show of hands, by standing, by a secret ballot, by holding up voting cards, or by a roll-call vote. Which method is used depends upon the nature of the business at issue and the certainty of the chair that a clear result will be obtained. (The chair may call for a voice vote and then, if uncertain about the result, ask for a show of hands or a roll-call vote.) Whenever a voice vote is taken, any member who thinks the result was inconclusive has the right to demand that it be retaken by a show of hands. A member does not have the right to demand a roll-call vote; because they are time consuming, a roll call vote must either be ordered by the presiding officer or be agreed to by a majority of those present.

IV. THE MOST COMMON SECONDARY MOTIONS

To Amend.

This motion allows you to change, add, or delete portions of the original main motion. It may be as simple as changing a word or as complex as substituting an entire paragraph. Examples: "I move to amend the motion by changing \$100 to \$200." "I move to delete the last paragraph and substitute the following....."

To Commit (Refer to a Committee).

Sometimes a motion becomes too complicated because of numerous attempts to amend it; or sometimes it is clear that more investigation is needed before taking action. Any Director may move to refer the motion to a committee for further consideration. This can be referral to a standing committee that already exists, or to a special committee appointed just for this purpose. Usually the committee will report back at the next meeting, but other terms can be specified in the motion to commit. Example: "I move to refer this matter to the Fiscal Committee and that the committee be directed to report back at the next regular meeting."

To Postpone.

A motion to postpone the motion to some stated future time -- this may be to later in the same meeting or to the next meeting. Example: "I move to postpone this matter to tomorrow at 3 p.m." This is what is known as a motion to "postpone definitely." RONR also has another motion, called 'postpone indefinitely' whose purpose is not to delay consideration, but to kill the motion altogether. We're not covering that one in today's basics.

To Adjourn.

Ordinarily, a meeting simply adjourns when all of the business has been finished or when the scheduled time for adjournment has arrived. However, the motion can be made at any time to end the meeting immediately, even if business is currently pending. The motion is not debatable or amendable and is immediately submitted for a vote. If the motion is adopted, the meeting is ended and the pending motion will become “unfinished” business for the next meeting.

To Recess.

To take a break. This may be as short as a few minutes or as long as overnight. It can be for a smoke break, to allow time for caucusing, or any other purpose. If the intent is to take an immediate recess, the motion is not debatable or amendable. Example: “I move we recess for 15 minutes.” However, a motion to recess at some specified later time can also be made. (E.g., “I move that we recess for an hour at 3:00 p.m.”) Under the latter circumstance, the motion is debatable and amendable. (Usually you’ll want to discuss the time and length of the recess.)

Move the Previous Question (Close Debate).

This motion ends debate on the pending motion(s). The correct form is “I move the previous question” but it is equally acceptable to say “I call for the question”, “I move that debate be closed”, “I move to close debate” or any similar phrasing. Unlike most other motions, it takes a 2/3 vote to close debate instead of a majority vote. This higher threshold protects the rights of the minority to have their fair opportunity to debate. This motion is not debatable, since that would defeat its purpose. You can move to close debate on just the immediately pending motion or you can close debate on “all matters”, which closes debate on all currently pending motions. (I.e., if there is a main motion and a motion to amend, the motion to close debate on all matters would end debate on both.)

To Reconsider.

This motion permits you to reconsider a motion that was previously acted upon. Perhaps the motion lost and you think the vote would now be different because of new information which was unavailable before or because you caucused during the recess. Or perhaps the motion passed, and you now think it was an unwise decision. This motion has a few special rules. It can only be made on the same day the motion was previously acted upon (or on the next day if the meeting is more than one day long.) It can also be made only by one who originally voted on the prevailing side. (In other words, by someone who is actually ‘reconsidering’ her previous vote.) If the motion to reconsider is adopted, the original motion is back before the group exactly as it was when it was last voted upon.

V. POINTS OF ORDER, INFORMATION AND PRIVILEGE

Point of Order.

A point of order is a way to call attention to the fact that the rules are being violated. Perhaps someone is speaking out of turn; perhaps the chair announced the vote incorrectly; perhaps someone is debating but has strayed way off the subject. The correct form is “I rise to a point of order” but you will usually just hear someone shout out “Point of Order!” You do not need to be recognized by the chair before rising to a point of order -- if the matter is truly urgent you can even interrupt the present speaker. The Chair will then ask you to state your point of order and you will announce the rule(s) you

believe are not being observed. The chair will either sustain your point of order and remedy the situation or announce that your point of order “is not well taken.” If a member disagrees with the ruling of the chair, she may ‘appeal’ the decision of the chair – in other words, submit it to the entire Board for a decision. The Chair then addresses the Board and submits it for a vote like any other motion. Usually the matter is not debatable. There are exceptions, but those are beyond this brief guide. It takes a majority vote to set aside the ruling of the chair. A tie vote sustains the chair. A point of order must be raised at the time the breach of rules occurs; it cannot be raised later in the meeting.

Point of Information.

This is a request to the chair that some information be provided. Perhaps you don’t know how you want to vote without knowing what the fiscal impact of the motion will be and you would like that question answered. It is a “privileged” motion, which means that the person raising it is given preference to others who may be waiting to be recognized. It requires no second and is responded to either by the chair or by another person at the chair’s direction. Example: “I would like a point of information. If this motion is adopted, what will be the cost of implementation?” A Point of Information may be used only to ask a question, not to supply information or to ask a ‘rhetorical’ question. The latter are engaging in debate and should be ruled out of order.

Question of Privilege (Point of Privilege).

A motion or request that is concerned with either the welfare of group itself or of a single member. For example, you would like the air conditioning turned on, or the speaker volume turned down, or you would like to be excused momentarily to answer a page. This is also a privileged motion that is given preference in recognition. It requires no second and is responded to either by the chair or by another at the chair’s direction. Some members use a point of privilege to make an “announcement”; this is an abuse of the motion because it typically delays the proceedings for something that isn’t urgent. Announcements should be held until there is no other business pending.

VI. HIERARCHY OF MOTIONS

There will frequently be several motions pending at once -- the main motion, a motion to amend, a motion to close debate, etc. Some motions can be made while another motion is already being debated; others cannot. The basic rule: You can only have one “main motion” pending at a time. However, you can have almost any number of ‘secondary’ motions that pertain to the main motion, provided they are made in the proper sequence.

Example:

The main motion is to approve a proposed amendment to the Bylaws. A motion to amend the the proposal may then be made, followed by a motion to refer the matter to a committee for further study, followed by a motion to close debate on all matters, followed by a motion to lay the entire matter on the table because a guest speaker has just arrived and you don’t want to delay her while you take the votes.

Each type of motion has a hierarchical relationship to the others. That is, motions that are higher on the list will be acted upon before those lower on the list. A motion that is lower on the list cannot be made if a higher ranked motion is already pending. When multiple motions are

pending, the votes are taken in descending order.

1. Adjourn
2. Recess
3. Question of privilege
4. Lay on the table
5. Previous question (end debate)
6. Postpone to a certain time
7. Commit or refer (to committee)
8. Amend
9. Postpone indefinitely (kill the motion)
10. Main Motion

For example: If there is a motion to postpone the main motion (6), you can no longer move to refer the main motion to a committee (7) or move to amend the motion (8). You could still move to close debate because that is a higher-ranking motion (5). You can always move to adjourn (1). This sounds complicated, but it rarely occurs that you have this many things going on at once – when it does happen, the hierarchy helps keep things orderly and avoids needless waste of time. For example, why would you want to take the time to introduce and debate amendments (8) if the higher-ranking motion to refer the matter to a committee (7) has already been made? Most members don't need to worry about this hierarchy; the presiding officer or parliamentarian will keep things sorted out.

VI. SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS

This handout is only the briefest of introductions to only a very small portion of parliamentary procedure. RONR devotes nearly 900 pages to the subject and there are exceptions to just about every rule we have just reviewed. While we don't expect everyone to get the itch to become a parliamentary expert, every member should:

- Know how to obtain the floor properly without disrupting the meeting.
- Know how to phrase a motion clearly and understandably.
- Recognize and respect every member's rights to participate equally in debate.
- Keep debate focused on the topic – and not on extraneous issues or personalities.
- Know where to obtain further information when needed.

Good Luck.

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